

FEEDING DAY

November 1

Isaac studied himself in the bathroom mirror. The fluorescents were not an ideal spotlight, but they served him well enough for now.

He patted his hair, gelled down. He smoothed out his tie—a confident navy blue—against his crisp white shirt. He cupped a hand and smelled his breath. Another mint was in order.

Clean-cut. Professional. Representative. Simple words—clichéd, perhaps—but necessary ones. A quirk of human psychology which always fascinated him was that, by consistently speaking or thinking phrases while making eye contact with oneself, one could consciously change one's own mindset. There was no ad-libbing character; it took effort.

Giving his wet hands a final shake, he about-faced from the sink and out of his bathroom. No sooner had he reentered his office than Melina popped her head in the doorway.

"Ah, thank you," he said as he resumed a seat at his desk.

She adjusted her glasses and withdrew a manila folder from under her wrinkled arm. "If you need it reformatted again, just let me know," she said, stepping in just enough to lay it by his monitor.

"Will do," he replied, with a grin which signified, gently, that the conversation could conclude.

"Okay," she replied cheerily, and headed back into the hall, leaving the door slightly ajar.

Isaac extracted the pen from his breast pocket, gave it a good click, and jotted down on his timesheet: "11:40 - ____: *Additional review of debate notes.*" Before he would make good on that, however, he leaned back and took in the space around him. The oak bookshelves buttressing the door. The maroon sunlight, streaming through the broad window behind him. A small glass sculpture of the Western crest, rising from a podium in the corner—a keepsake turned parting gift from the previous occupant.

He'd long taken living in the nation's capital for granted, but the externship now undeniably showed its perks. Only a month in, and he was already lending a hand on critical projects for the West Party Committee, Third Department branch. Everything from organizing local rallies to keeping the number of blood sacrifices in the county to a minimum had crossed his inbox.

It was only a week until Feeding Day, though, and the whole building was antsy. As well it should be—they were facing the most controversial feeding plan in generations. He felt daunted yet privileged to be a part of making sure West continued to be *the* direction for the nation.

With a satisfied inhale, he scooted forward and flicked open the folder. The talking points were all satisfyingly condensed: gun violence rates; the right to life; surveillance technology. This was the first trick he learned on the high school forensics team: shrink the talking points on the page as they grow in your head, like water pouring from one jug to another. Every bullet point becomes a hardened shot at the opposition's argument. From many small contributions comes one great movement.

Greenburg University had done him a great honor, Isaac realized, in extending the invitation to take part in a mock directional debate. Finally, someone outside the law school had noticed his GPA. His opponent was someone referred to only as “The Fox.” The secrecy frustrated him, but he understood the logic: fight the argument, not the arguer. And, after all, he was surely the main draw. At least he knew it would be a fellow Greenburg student.

The review took ten minutes, after which he placed the report back in the corner of his desk. Lunchtime. Which reminded him...

He pulled open the leftmost desk drawer. His offering still looked fresh. The clinic had said it would keep for a week at room temperature, if covered. Either way, it was the thought that counted.

November 2

“Can’t these wait?” Amanda fumbled with her scarf, trying to wrap it around her neck with one hand. In the other hand, she held a stack of posters, each bearing a giant “W” on a blue backdrop.

“They could, but they shouldn’t,” Isaac said. The drive back to Greenburg had been brief and uneventful, but even that delay meant double-time now. Work for the Committee continued around the clock, and he wouldn’t take the time off even if he could. He could politely entertain conversations about movies and celebrity culture, but he never understood people who didn’t see Ræek as the most critical thing in the world. Even after this round of posters, there’d be cold-calls to make, donations to secure, and plenty of social media posts to get viral. Now more than ever, every undecided feeder counted.

“Alright. But, let’s put one of these on the breakfast bar next, ‘K?’”

Isaac murmured agreement as he scanned the campus for prime posting locations, like a hawk keen on an elusive mouse. Fortunately, he had a pleasant backdrop upon which to do it: strolling up the gentle curve of University Way, everything from the lake beyond the observatory, a pale green in the red morning light, to the sturdy stone spires of the law school to their left, was gorgeous, even in the pre-feeding climate. Dozens of students sat and strolled about the grounds, while cars slowly rolled through the T-intersection a block ahead.

“Why do we have to replace these if they’re already up, again?”

Isaac pursed his chapped lips. Amanda was kind, clever, and casually fed for the West, but he remembered why she was the kind of friend he didn’t call until he needed a hand. “Variety,” he replied. “People’s eyes grow used to familiar sights, no matter how striking. By now, everyone you see around us has already tuned last month’s posters out, and—ah, excuse me!”

They moved to the grass, bright orange and brittle, as a dozen little kids in matching purple t-shirts scampered down the sidewalk after a young woman in a long yellow dress holding a tablet PC. “Now, ‘Feeding Day’ is a bit of a misleading name,” she instructed. “The actual feeding takes about a whole ‘nother week!”

“Neato!” A girl with askew glasses scrawled a prominent note on a pad and resumed watching where their teacher pointed.

An elementary school field trip, Isaac presumed. He smiled. Even when he could barely reach a doorknob, Ræek fascinated him, too. He remembered leafing through a history book in first grade, one so big he could crouch behind it and disappear between the pages, and tracing his fingers over the illustrations as he read about the first settlers who discovered Ræek. The selfless founders who laid the first bricks of the White Womb for its comfort, who mapped and paved out the angles across the land which they would come to call the Trail. How they, afraid and aimless, learned of its righteous guidance, if only they gave something of their own in return. The wars fought, assassinations attempted, conspiracies uncovered to upend its place—all overcome. That power of security in choice Ræek offered was too awesome.

Across the street, between a yield sign and a stone marker heralding the esplanade, was the bus stop. On its short side shone a West poster, waiting to be refreshed. “There!” Isaac pointed, pausing at the crosswalk.

“Hold on, hold on...” Amanda clutched her cap.

While he waited for her to catch up, Isaac noticed a heavily bundled man slowly approach the stop and study the poster. He wore a silver scarf atop a long black peacoat, shut tight and yet billowing beneath a snug black stocking cap. He reached into his coat, produced a thick marker, and slashed a broad gray “X” across the poster.

“Hey!” Isaac barked. “Stop that!” The guy broke into a run. Isaac told himself it wasn’t worth the sweat—and besides, he’d just had his suit dry-cleaned. But it was the principle of the thing!

He darted across the intersection. The guy hopped onto a bench, and from there to the top of the retaining wall surrounding the earth sciences building. “Friggin’ vandal!” Isaac shouted. Past where the guy hurried out of sight, over the dewy curve of the hill, Isaac spotted a bulletin board with another of his old West posters. The same gray “X” defaced it.

Isaac climbed onto the bench, grabbed the wall, hoisted himself up... and promptly slipped and fell. His feet caught the bench, and he fell back-first to the sidewalk.

“Oh, shit!” Amanda scurried over. “You okay?”

Isaac nodded, winced, and eased himself up, waving off her offered hand. He’d had the wind knocked out of him once before—a punch to the gut in fifth grade, after a playground argument over his father’s job escalated—so the impact didn’t faze him. But a brush of his sore back confirmed the concrete had taken to his jacket like a grater to cheese.

“Who was that?” Amanda asked.

“Some bum,” Isaac fumed. “Messing with my work.” He forced a smile. “You know what? Let’s do breakfast. Just give me a sec.”

Isaac pulled out his phone.

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The red and white checkerboard of the tablecloth left James conflicted. On one hand, it reminded him of home—cookouts, tire swings, the smell of smoked meat and bug spray. On the other hand, they looked like to-do boxes—assignments to complete, spaces to initial. Like any respectable man, he could enjoy a hard day’s work; he just didn’t want or need it in his

face while he tried to finish his damn eggs 'n bacon. He grabbed the newspaper again, opened it. Suddenly, his calendar cleared right up.

Behind him, a rustle of cotton, a jingle of keys. "You almost done?"

"Mmm-hmm."

Amy rushed back to the other side of the kitchen to adjust the stovetop burner. Her snug indigo pantsuit stood out beneath braided blonde hair like the crest of a sunrise.

"Hrm. Look at this, hon. '*East's Strength Poses Challenge to Battleground States*: With less than a week until Feeding Day, the most chaotic directional battle in memory has grown all the more competitive, although polls indicate the East still promises a broader path to victory than the West.'"

She shook her head. "I don't know what kind of rag they're delivering these days."

He smirked and sipped his coffee, black as the rain pooling in the driveway past the kitchen window.

"Mama, can I feed for the East?" Kimberly was suddenly on the fringe of the kitchen, pink socks patting the tile floor as she anxiously kneaded her doll's hair.

Amy frowned and crouched before her daughter. "Now, why would you want to do that, sweetie?"

She scratched her long black hair and fidgeted the doll. "'Cause if, if not, it's gonna rain blood all over town, 'n that'd be bad."

"Veins, babe," James said.

"But veins is blood, daddy!"

"Veins carry the blood, babe. Like straws." He slurped some more coffee and flipped the newspaper with a definitive rustle.

"Sweet—sweetie." Amy nudged Kimberly away from where a pot of water bubbled insistently above. "Why don't you head back upstairs and play while daddy gets ready for work, okay?"

"Okie!" She darted away and tromped out of sight up their narrow staircase.

Amy leveled a furrowed, well-plucked brow at her husband. "I thought I told you to leave the window closed when she's sleeping."

"It was just a crack."

"'A crack' is open! I'm not comfortable with our daughter seeing that kind of imagery, especially at night."

"Would you rather she saw it during the day and spent the whole evening crying about it?"

"That's not how it works, and you know it." Her braid nearly slapped him as she whipped around and took the pot off the stove. As she navigated it across the countertop, her phone jingled on the table before James.

James checked the caller ID over his glasses. He blinked back to the Sports page. "Ame."

"One second." She dried her hands and snatched it up over his shoulder. She read the screen, and flicked James another disappointed glare. She cocked her neck to sandwich the phone between her ear and purse strap.

"Hey, Isaac!"

"Mom! Hey, how's it going?"

"Oh, just getting ready. Big merger meeting today, so I'm trying to *keep everybody moving*." She widened her eyes at James, who chugged some more coffee and corked his mouth with the remaining bacon.

"Ha! Alright. So, hey, I'm *just* shy of this month's paycheck, and I need a little extra to get a new suit. It's for work, and then there's the debate coming up—"

"Sure, hon!" She patted her side to confirm her car keys were there. "How much do you need?"

"Just like five hundred bucks should do."

"I'll deposit it right away," she beamed.

"Thanks! And, you got the tickets ready?"

"Yep, right here in my purse." She patted it against her side. "Oh, I can't wait to see you again!"

"Me too," Isaac smiled.

"Okay, have a good day, honey."

Their goodbyes concluded, Amy stuffed the phone in her purse. "He's your son, Jim."

James studied the headlines over his scratched glasses. "So I hear."

November 3

James Kostalecki, the nameplate shone from the back of his cubicle. Amy gave it to him, after it came up in pillow talk that the office hadn't. He didn't want to admit that was because he still hadn't earned one.

A decade and a half he'd worked at the cannery, breaking his back to make sure corn and carrots didn't become a thing of the past, and all it took was a few weeks for some pencil-pusher to write the code for the 'autonomous system' that put him out on his ass. These days, the only back he broke was from hunching over a keyboard. It was Ame's idea that he become a paralegal—they're hiring at any age, she said! As if that would motivate him.

Still, two years later, here he was. He guessed he was supposed to be proud, and in some slight sense, he was. But he was long since tired of pretending to be *excited*. Wives and sons were supposed to take after fathers, not the other way around.

He scratched his beard, as if to coax some answers from the silver stubble. What was happening to this country? When he was Kimberly's age, men were men, women were women, and kids knew their place. Now? Not only did nobody know who they were, nobody cared. The world was a crib of overgrown children bumping into each other as they looked for new garbage to buy or sins to commit.

He'd worked with his hands. He'd *made* things. What was this? A keyboard. A glossy screen. An old mug full of slender pens with "Ligotti & Baldwin, LLP" etched on the barrel. It was a living, but it wasn't an honest one.

"Did you see the new East vision the other night?" Dave, just over his shoulder, leaning against the vending machine. He popped in a handful of quarters, every *chink-clunk* as they fell to its innards like an old game show countdown for a response.

"Nah," Johnny said, leaning opposite Dave. "I was cramming for the Haverfeld report. When'd it come on?"

"One A.M.-ish."

"Oh yeah? How was it?"

"The rainforests were burning bright orange. I saw the whole town buried in chunks of veins that rained from a single, pale red cloud. Every radio station played a distant, mournful howl, 24/7."

Dave snorted. A soda clattered out of the machine; he swiped it up, cracked the lid, and took a dismissive swig. "Usual scare tactics."

"It's got a point, though."

"Damned if I know what it is."

Johnny shrugged. "So, you feed yet?"

"I got it over with the other day. There's an offering station by the library downtown."

"You don't say?" Janice, in the cubicle to their right, spun around in her chair. "Geez, I thought it was five miles out!"

"Hey, Jan," Nick added from across the room, "a couple of us are heading out after lunch to feed—you should come along."

"Why, might as well!"

James couldn't focus. He put his headphones on and picked back up with the latest episode of *Mann with a Plan*. A tap, and Laurie Mann's sassy timbre assuaged his ears.

"—and the mainstream media likes to pick on people who make blood offerings, but you know what? We've all thought about it. It's quick, meaningful, and traditional. But oh, no, the West won't hear of that—not rich enough for their blood. While they're busy telling everyone to check their privilege, they can't be bothered to check their pulse. But folks, I hate to say it, but none of this is new. Every cycle, people accuse an Eastern move of bringing regression and chaos. And yet, if you stack 'em up side-by-side, Western moves have turned out worse every time. I mean, how have the last eight years been treating you?"

James nodded. As much as a man could respect a woman who wasn't his wife, he respected Laurie. He reminded her of Amy when they first married—before she turned her gaze up past the 'glass ceiling' and switched directions. *They can't stay young forever.*

Nick tapped his shoulder. "James, wanna come with?"

"Oh..." James removed the headphones. "That's alright. I've got tickets for the Womb."

Nick's eyebrows skyrocketed. "No kidding? Lucky man!" He patted James' chair.

James watched as Nick joined a handful of coworkers huddled in the break room. Heads bowed, they raised their offerings like toasts.

"A jar of vitreous," Janice said, "so that it might see what stifles my vision every morn."

"A vial of shaved skin from my feet," Nick said, "so that it might walk as if in my shoes."

"An apple slice, freshly cut," Michael said, "to nurture the promise of sweet prosperity."

"Simple as they may be," Ellen said, "we put ourselves into these offerings so that Ræek, imbued with our hopes and dreams made fruit and flesh, may take them unto itself and proceed across the land with purpose." She looked back up. "Now, who's hungry?"

The group laughed amongst themselves as they headed for the exit.

James was surprised; declarations of purpose hadn't been expected since his *father* was a boy. Maybe there was hope for this generation yet. The desire to feel close and connected to someone—anyone—couldn't have dwindled so quickly.

His own offering was still in his briefcase, in a zipped baggie: a chip of wood and a chip of metal, from the hatchet he owned growing up. It wasn't much, but it stood for the discipline and determination that made him who he was. That had always been enough.

The lunch troupe had stopped in the hallway. Nick was pointing at something through the half-open blinds. The kids were whispering amongst themselves.

"It's just another protest, come on."

"Are they allowed out there?"

"What the—"

More coworkers began gathering by the blinds, prying them apart to peer outside. James heard faint shouting from the street—short and angry, like loose sparks. Then came a fleshy *crack*. The sparks became a thunderstorm.

"Whoa!"

"Some kinda fight going on out there!"

Probably some more of those whiny far-Westerners harassing an East supporter again. James pictured going out there and socking 'em all in the jaw, then coolly heading back inside and resuming his spreadsheet.

He spun back around, took a deep breath, and put his headphones on.

November 4

"A peaceful pro-West protest erupted into violence yesterday afternoon, when a group of East supporters interrupted a demonstration outside city hall in downtown—"

Sean paused the newsfeed. Something was banging around in the TV room. "Cale!" He hollered. "Knock it off!"

"Sorry, man," Cale called back. "The rat showed up again!"

Fuckin' roommates. He'd live alone, were it not for the rent. Eight hundred dollars a month for student housing minus central heating, minus air conditioning, and minus pest protection was unconscionable.

Cale stumbled back into the bedroom, holding a lightly bloodied broomstick, and slammed the door shut. "Yeah... yeah." He wiped long, gristly locks out of his face. "Oh, by the way, Dusty's coming over in a sec."

"Reinforcements. Thanks for the notice."

"Ha! Heh." Cale peeked at the window past him, even though the shades were drawn, and pulled his bong out from behind the recliner. "Friiii-day niight," he sang as he lit up. "Hey, how come you weren't in class today?"

"And you were?"

Cale coughed. "It's somebody's time of the month."

It's this whole country's time of the month, Sean thought—but didn't say. Arguing with Cale was like trying to punch through a pillow. Instead, he just confirmed the blanket was still draped over the angular lump on his workspace table. "Did you need something, or...?"

"Yeah! Actually. Hey, we made, like, these window decals in design class, and I was gonna say, you can have one." He fished a large, translucent-green "N" out of his bomber jacket.

Sean got up and inspected it. "Now, let me guess, you want me to slap this on my car?"

"Just tryin' to spread the cause, man."

Sean wrinkled his nose. "You're not seriously still feeding for the North, are you?"

"Hell yes!" Cale flopped onto the sofa, exhaling a plume of crumbs and dust that melded with the tangy smog slowly filling the room. Above, the plastic bag rubber-banded around the smoke detector quivered like a jellyfish. "That's where it's at, man. This is the year."

"Good luck with that."

"Hey, c'mon. You saw that vision the other week, right?"

Sean checked the time on his laptop before slamming it shut. The Collegetown hardware store would be closing soon. "No."

Cale sighed like a smitten schoolgirl. "Legit. The rivers turned into soda, e. coli poisoning disappeared, and it was impossible to ever stub your toe!"

"When was this vision, Cale?"

"Four o'two A.M."

"And how long was it?"

He cleared his throat. "Couple—couple seconds."

"And how well do you remember the details?"

He aired out his jacket with a greasy hand. "I mean, like, just the highlights, but—"

"That's what I thought." Sean headed for the door.

"Whoa! You goin' to feed? Place's closin' any sec now."

"I'm not feeding. We've been through this."

"Not feeding?" Cale swung the bong from his grimy throne, like a displeased king's scepter.

"So what? It's not illegal."

"No, but it's, like... irresponsible."

"Well, I reject the idea that it even matters. Three-hundred-million-plus people are going to be lining up to cast their offerings, and they act like Ræek's going to miss one sandwich or dead cat."

"Well, like, if you really think that... then all the more reason to, right?" He pounded his chest, coaxing another hiccough.

"Name a year it went North—or South." Sean flung a finger at him. "Actually, I'll save us both some time—you can't. You're throwing your offering away."

Cale threw up his hands. "K, K, chill! I just, I..." He grabbed a chunk of his hair and jiggled it. "Some of this. Cut it, dropped it off the other day, 'cause it's slow but it gets awesome after a while. I say... you gotta feed for what you believe. After that, it's out of our hands."

“Not necessarily.” Cale’s eyes wandered to the dark, beer-blotched carpet. “Not if someone blows that... thing up.” He realized his fingernails dug into the wood of the door. He consciously flexed his digits, relaxed his grip.

“Heh.” Cale spun to recline on his back. “Wishful thinkin’.”

“People have tried before. Eventually, someone will succeed where they failed, and we’ll get some real change.”

Cale’s head lolled in mock contemplation. “Oooor... it’ll regenerate. Again. There’s no point, man! ‘Sides, you could get arrested ‘n shit for saying stuff like that. So not worth it.”

Another bang sounded from the TV room. Cale’s phone vibrated against his chest. He grunted, checked the screen, and sprung to his feet. “Dusty’s here. Says he’s locked out and some guy with a cart fulla popcans is mean-muggin’ him.” He darted through the ajar door, swapping bong for broomstick on the way. “Northward bound!”

As the banging gave way to inebriate fraternal greetings (and a fleeting rodentlike squeak), Sean closed the door. He hurried back to his desk and lifted the blanket from the lump on his workspace.

It wasn’t what he had in mind growing up, when he pictured a bomb. The thing was all angular piping and scattered switches and knobs, like robotic intestines frozen atop each other. But that innocent image washed out months ago, when he learned what ‘improvised explosive device’ really meant. How to space out buying the components across different stores. How to scrub his search histories and use multiple browsers across various ISP addresses.

A quick overview confirmed that Cale’s cannabis habit still hadn’t affected the device’s components.

Sean peeked past the shades. The ashes had started falling, silhouetted like static against the yellow moon. It was going to be another cold one.

He grabbed his silver scarf, his long black peacoat, and his snug black stocking cap, and headed out to evade the night. Even if the store was out of fuses for now, there was always Sunday for him to make his own bang.

November 5

“Boycott Afternews!”

“Boo!”

“You’re on the wrong side of history!”

They’re still there? And was that an old-fashioned “boo” someone had let out? Laurie retracted from the blinds and smirked. Out of sight, out of mind. And as for the sound, it was nothing a live studio audience couldn’t drown out.

A man with a prodigious headset and sweat-stained polo shirt popped his head into the dressing room. “On in five, Ms. Mann.”

“Okay!” They exchanged smiles and reversed to their respective roles. Laurie scooted back to lean against the makeup table and flicked open her phone to behold her most recent spate of notifications:

[@jessika135: *Slut #EastIsLeast*]

[@starKitty: *Literally die. #WestIsBest*]

[@BobOpp: *I hope Ræek chokes you to death in your sleep.*]

She'd grown used to it. Background noise. Laurie was on the fast track to becoming one of the most tweeted-about female vloggers, and with that exposure came notoriety. She'd be no better than them—no stronger-willed, an East-minded gal—if she crumpled at the first expletive in her inbox. Besides, they only proved her point: the West was weak, emotionally unstable. She should be thanking them, really. She was “dangerous”? Her slogan was “hate speech”? It'd be funny if some of those people weren't going to be loading up their cars and feeding right alongside her come Tuesday. Still, imagine the jealousy on their faces when they saw she was engaged.

But that would be *then*. Now was that blissful period between when the cosmetics crew backed off and the cameras popped on. She didn't consider herself a superstar by any measure, but she'd been interviewed enough to keep her cool before the countdown. Just a couple of questions—her face and thoughts in the public consciousness, where they belonged—and she could split.

And, for better or worse, growing up a woman gave her an assembly line-like ability to scrutinize every one of her features. She straightened up before the mirror.

Permed, shoulder-length brown hair? Check.

Incisive blue eyes, lightened by imperceptible contacts? Check.

Dimpled cheeks, not a spot to be seen? And the triple!

Muffled beyond walls coated with network promotional posters, the show's fanfare blared. Laurie checked her nails, a pale salmon shade, and smiled. Some looks never went out of style.

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“I'm Cecil Coltrane.”

“I'm Megan Martisol.”

“And welcome back to The Afternews. Our next guest is Laurie Mann, cohost of *Mann with a Plan*, cofounder of the ‘She for East’ campaign, and now *coauthor* of a book. It's called ‘*Ræeking Havoc: 101 Ways the West Effs It Up.*’ How are you, Laurie?”

“Can't complain, Cecil, Megan,” she replied, over the last claps from the audience. “Happy to be here.”

She doffed her cap, brilliant red with ‘Let the East Speak’ stitched across it in white. A quick wave of additional whoops rose from the seats. Between her and the hosts, crowds huddled against the studio window. Gloved hands clutched a collage of bouncing banners and placards: “END THE WAR”; “SHE'S THE MANN”; “RÆEK BE BLESSED.” A mosaic in motion, vibrant yet muted in the cold autumn air.

“Laurie,” Megan continued, “I’ll cut right to it. You’ve been called a traitor, a professional provocateur, and ‘the most hated woman on the East Side.’ How do you respond to titles like this?”

She chuckled. “I’ve been getting that for years. After a while, you just learn to have faith in yourself, to believe in your own *beliefs*. So, some people can’t wrap their heads around the idea a woman would want to feed for the East this year—or any year. And you know what? Fair enough. But to take it out on me online, or in person, that’s just immature.”

“Well, that’s a fair point,” Cecil added. “And, it’s one you make quite a bit in this book, in different ways. It’s got essays, anecdotes, pictures... actually, we’ve got one of those here.” He looked off-set. “Can we pull that up?”

This was when the broadcast would cut to a graphic. Here, though, she saw only two empty coffee mugs on a glass table—brand name strategically aimed at the viewers—and, atop the stools just past it, two more empty mugs in formalwear.

“This,” Cecil indicated to the air, “is a reprint of a tweet you posted earlier this year, it says ‘Scientific Projection: If Only People with Above-Average IQs Fed,’ and it shows entirely states which were projected to feed for the East.”

“Ha, yeah,” Laurie nodded. “But if you don’t like that one, folks, there’s plenty more.” A slighter wave of laughs rose from the audience.

“But, now,” Megan said, “it’s fair to say that feeding is no laughing matter for many people this week. Just to pick *one* example, Ræek has garnered a lot of attention for suggesting an Eastern move this year could teleport thousands of citizens to what... sixty-two percent of those polled described as ‘an abyssal void, dark and unyielding.’ Do you think it’s irresponsible to advocate for the possibility of that happening?”

Laurie almost frowned but caught herself. “You’re referring to the vision of August twentieth?”

Megan nodded, and Laurie chuckled again. “So amazing how that keeps getting misinterpreted. If people paid attention, Ræek made it clear that the void would only be populated by those with wickedness in their souls. Y’know, like serial killers or registered sex offenders. It’s not random, for Pete’s sake! The East that *I* know, that I stand for, is firm but fair.” She smirked. “We certainly don’t threaten to execute people.”

“Some may beg to differ.” Megan leaned forward. “In an article this Monday on the *Last Mann Standing* blog, you called a group of West supporters who chained themselves across a bridge to raise awareness of cultural appropriation ‘a minor roadblock, for anyone determined enough’.”

The bitch had been waiting the whole segment to bring that up, hadn’t she? Maybe the studio lights were supposed to make her sweat. But to Laurie, it felt like a tanning booth—she just looked better the longer she stayed under them. She swallowed. “That was a joke, Megan. But, I stand by my conclusions in the post. Too many young people today would rather show off their cause than fight for it.”

“Well, that may not always be a bad thing.” Cecil flashed a sheepish grin. “Some people are saying if the East wins on Tuesday, there’s going to be real violence in the streets.”

Laurie waved the fearmongering away. “*Psh*. There’d be violence in the streets either way. People always want an excuse to wreck shit, the Feeding is just the best one.”

The hosts tensed up. Megan's eyes darted off-set—*bleep that*.

Cecil swooped in with the save. "That's one way to put it! So, uh, one last thought: On your podcast, you frequently say how the buildup to this feeding cycle is the most divisive one you've seen in your lifetime. In a nutshell, what advice does your book have for all the undecided feeders out there?"

Laurie looked out upon the crowd. Humble men in flannel shirts sat side-by-side with women in pantsuits. Calculated. But not unfair.

"That just because we can't rule ourselves doesn't mean we have to let anybody push us around—especially Westers. The meteorological reports, health surveys, viable birth rates... everything has always turned out safe and reliable under an Eastern move. Now, these last eight years have been dark times, but I believe, if we *let the East speak* once more... We'll all be pleasantly surprised at what we hear, for a change."

"Hey, here's hoping." Cecil reached across the table to shake her hand. "Laurie Mann, everybody!" The fanfare pealed once more in surround sound.

Laurie may have heard a stray jeer sprinkled among the adulation as she strode off set, head and heels held high, but it couldn't bother her. It was just words and sound. That's all the West was good for.

Outside the studio, Laurie had barely cleared the stone steps before she needed to double-tie her slicker. The black rain had started back up, and the buzz was rising. Where was her car, again?

"This way, Ms. Mann," said a bulky officer, motioning her forth. Oily raindrops splattered his sunglasses and uniform.

"Okay." Her phone started ringing. She fished it out of her back pocket with one hand while she attempted to open her umbrella with the other. "Mark? Hey, I—I know, right? Went pretty damn good, all things considered. Look, if we want it in paperback before the year is out, we need to—"

Something small and hard smashed into Laurie's cheek. She crumpled to her knees on the shattered blacktop, and then to her side.

"How's *that* for a minor roadblock, bitch?" someone shouted.

"You! Down on the ground!" Sideways, past a bloody chunk of rubble, Laurie watched as the cop sprinted at a crowd of twenty-somethings in "W" shirts. The hiss of pepper spray and high-pitched screams mixed with the rising buzz as her eyes narrowed into nothingness.

November 6

Nausea prodded Isaac's midsection like a rough knuckle. He felt a belch building in his gut and clenched it off, like wet fingers over a lit match. He tapped the side of his head. The welt there still remained.

Preparation. Confidence. Determination. These were simple words. He was only human—but human wasn't enough. At least he was able to get a new suit fitted in time.

The stage was modest yet magnificent, a worn-wood half circle stretched before moth-eaten mauve curtains which poured from the rafters like waterfalls. In the amphitheater beyond, at least five hundred students and staff had already gathered, settling into two tiers

of worn seats. Most were either checking their phones or leafing through the programs being distributed by ushers stationed atop the aisles.

Amanda eased up beside Isaac, standing on the fringe of the spotlight. The blurred region where dark became light. "You ready?" she asked.

He nodded.

"Cool. Hey, I got all the rest of the posters up. There were some more with those gray X's on them, so I replaced those too."

"Oh, thanks." There was a podium up there with his name on it—literally.

At some point, Amanda left his side. He could apologize for the snub later. For now, he was waiting for his opponent to emerge from the shadows. The moderator shuffled his papers before the stage, and a couple of student journalists crouched near the orchestra pit, notepads in hand, but the stage was still empty.

It remained empty as a woman with frazzled brown curls of hair and a thick headset around her neck urged Isaac up to the podium

"Hey, is the other person almost here?" he asked. "Because—"

"Yeah. He better show up soon," she half-answered, before disappearing back off-stage.

Fair enough. Isaac considered the moderator, a similarly *clean-cut* guy, in a similar suit and tie. Whereas Isaac thought of himself as having a welcoming face, though, this guy was all sharp angles and tight curves. *He could cut someone with those cheekbones.*

The moderator turned to face the audience. "Alright!" A lapel mic carried his voice across the amphitheater. "Alright, everybody. We're about ready to begin, if you could take your seats."

The crowd simmered down, and the moderator continued. "I'd like to thank you all for coming to the fifth annual Greenburg student mock debate, sponsored by Greenburg Law School and the Board of Student Trustees. My name is Hal Anderson, and I'll be the moderator this evening. It is our hope that this event will provide a valuable demonstration of the critical thinking and argumentation skills so important to success in the modern world—and provide some entertainment while we're at it!"

He spun back around. "Arguing for the West, we have Isaac Kostalecki, a third-year student at Greenburg Law. A native of our nation's capital, Isaac is currently externing for the West Party Committee, Third Department branch, and served as president of the Greenburg debate club in undergrad."

Isaac beamed, nodding with a cordial wave. This was his element. His oxygen.

"And, arguing for the East, we have..."

A figure emerged from the shadows at stage right. A figure whom Isaac immediately recognized, even before he removed his silver scarf, long black peacoat, and snug gray stocking cap.

"Sean Fox!"

Isaac's hands started to tremble as "Fox" dropped his layers in the wings and sauntered up to his podium. "Sorry I'm late," he said coolly, audible only to Isaac over the crowd's rising cheers.

"Sean is a sophomore here at Greenburg, double-majoring in sociology and drama."

Isaac was still processing what was happening, but Hal proceeded. "I will pose a series of questions to each of you in turn. You will have two minutes to answer each. Understood?"

"Yep," Sean said into his mic.

"Ah... uh, yes," Isaac said, eying Sean.

Hal looked down at a slim stack of cards in his hands. "To Isaac. Western moves have been criticized for their effect on international relations in the past. How do *you* believe Ræek taking to the West bodes for this nation's relationship with its allies—and enemies?"

Isaac cleared his throat. *Breathe in. Big heartbeat. Breathe out. Nobody else is here, in this moment.* "Hal, Ræek may not have a brain as we understand it, but it's not stupid. Over the last eight years, we've clearly seen that the further West it got, the less failed drone strikes occurred overseas, the more multilateral treaties were successfully signed, and the more babies who were *born* bilingual. I'd call that a win for the whole world."

"Sure you're not forgetting anything?" Sean said.

"Hmm?"

Sean cricked his neck. "Where did you hear that? What sources are you basing that on?"

Isaac couldn't have been gladder that Sean asked. He mentally thumbed through his debate outline until he found a citation. "Numerous studies done by nonprofit organizations based here and abroad, including—"

"Funded by who?"

"Well, I can't say specifically from memory, but I can assure you they're reputable."

"Doesn't it bother you that the mainstream media has been proven time and again to have a blatant pro-West bias?"

Excuse me? Isaac spared a glance off-stage. Hal was a statue, the crouched journalists seemed as troubled as him, and the audience could go either way. Isaac squinted into the crowd. A few people already had their phones up, poorly hiding an illicit recording—but who were they aimed at?

No matter. "The media reports the facts, and if all the facts point to one side consistently being right, then so be it."

"You're unbelievable, you know that?"

"That's two minutes!" Hal shuffled his cards. "Sean: From increasing incidents of death by stabbings to higher levels of testosterone in public waterways, many critics say an Eastern move twelve years ago left women seriously disadvantaged. What will an Eastern move mean for the state of women's rights in the nation today?"

Sean rocked back on his heels, staring at the stage lights, mouth agape. Then, he snapped back. "That, pretty much. Could get even worse, really."

What the hell? Isaac would've smiled if he thought he could bare his teeth without growling. He got it, now. This was a joke. A mock debate indeed. When tonight was over, whoever was behind this was going to wish they'd never invited him. But in the meantime, he wouldn't slouch.

"If I may, Hal..." Isaac shifted his stance. "There's a consistent trend for the last several decades of healthier births and little to no wage gap during a Western move. Compared to just a generation ago, Ræek's last eight years have been positively feminist."

"Really?" Sean nearly cocked an eyebrow right off his head. "So you're a gender studies major now."

Fight the argument. Not the arguer. "Does it matter either way?"

"If who we are as people, if what we *really* believe and care about, doesn't matter, then what are we doing here?"

"We're simply having a dialogue—"

Sean scoffed. "It's always a 'dialogue' with you people. And yet nothing ever changes in this country!"

Gotcha. Isaac straightened up. "Sure it does."

"Like what?"

"Four years ago: Ræek went West again, and..." He started counting off fingers. "Employment went up—everybody felt much more determined. The environment improved—all that chemical runoff from the fracking operation, just over the border? Sucked straight out."

"Yeah, and then it melted a schoolbus. While it was in use."

Isaac sighed. "People keep bringing that up, but if you look at it in context—"

Sean laughed. "You Westers. Always think you know better than everyone else just because you can wear a suit and 'raise awareness'. If you're so interested in change, why don't *you* do something about it?"

"I..." Isaac gripped the podium's sides. "I do—every day." He gestured to the crowd. "I study, I volunteer for the community, I take clinical courses, and I participate in events like *this*." *So you can make an ass of yourself in front of a thousand people.*

"And that's two minutes!" Hal flipped to the next card. "Isaac—"

"Four more years, then what?" Sean blurted.

Isaac froze in the middle of adjusting his collar. "Come again?"

"Isaac," Hal interjected, "what, in your opinion, is—"

"Four years from now, what *really* changes? What will Ræek do?"

Isaac couldn't help but chuckle this time. He felt bad, but also like he was back home on the front porch, explaining the A-B-Cs and how to count change to Kimberly. "It'll disintegrate, return to the White Womb, and start all over again."

Sean slammed the podium. "*Exactly!* We just keep feeding this thing! Nobody *actually* knows how it works, and nobody knows where it comes from!"

Isaac cleared his throat. "You're being a little dramatic."

"If we..." Hal tapped the cards against his wrist. "If we could just..."

"You really think that *thing* actually cares what we want? It decided that centuries—no, *millennia* ago. Whoever it's serving, it ain't us. We need to take control. We need to rule *ourselves!*"

Past Sean, a pair of broad-shouldered men in black polo shirts tucked into khakis slowly approaching the dark-light fringe. The sight emboldened Isaac.

"People can't govern each-other," Isaac explained. "That's been proven—basic biology, neuroscience. Human organizational groups fall apart past rudimentary lawmaking and

administration of punishment. Only Ræek has the blessed might to rule all and see all. We simply have the liberty to decide in which direction it does so."

"But what if we *could*," Sean begged. "What if everybody just decided not to feed it?"

Isaac laughed. "Well, that is—obviously—impossible."

"But what if they did?"

Isaac pinched the bridge of his nose. "Look, please, just... pick a side."

"Why?"

"For the sake of the argument."

"Why does everybody have to argue? Everybody questions, and nobody acts. Oh, wait, you know why? Because it's easier to feel good about shitting on someone than to practice what you preach."

"You don't practice *or* preach!" Isaac yelled. Something in his left temple crackled. A dull ache ran from his left armpit down to his wrist.

"How does it feel knowing none of this matters? We're fucked either way."

A murmur rippled through the crowd. What little blood was left in Isaac's knuckles flooded to his face. "This is not an acceptable format for a debate."

"And every fucked-up thing that happens, you're just going to ignore, blame on the other side, or say it's a *good* thing!"

The security guards crossed the fringe and entered the stage. *Save me from this*, Isaac thought at them. This embarrassment. This bad dream. Who had Sean organized this with? How many others were in on it?

"*Wake up!*" Sean expounded as one of the men grabbed his bicep.

"Alright, sir, that's enough."

"Please, just, come offstage and—"

"Go to the library! Look online! It doesn't have to be like this!" Sean thrashed as security pulled him away. *Thank you*, Isaac all but shouted. He prayed for another second of eye contact, to let Sean face whatever reprimand he'd earned with the knowledge of whose cooler head truly prevailed. But his opponent's head convulsed as wildly as the mind within it.

"Everybody," Hal said, waving down the audience, alive with the clatter of snapshots, snickering, and general outrage. "Everybody, please, I apologize for the inconvenience! The debate will continue in just a moment with a new representative for the East, if you'll just be patient."

Amanda rushed onstage, accompanied by the woman with the headset.

"That's the bum guy!" Amanda clarified.

"Mr. Kostalecki, I'm so sorry, he said... when he signed up, he told us he was pro-East."

"*Admit it, Isaac! I've knocked you on your back again!*" Sean's throat audibly tore with his final cry.

Isaac shouldered past both women. *Clean-cut. Professional. Representative.*

Clean-cut. Professional. Representative.

November 7

Isaac stared out the window of the plane. Below, lush orange hills turned to gridded cityscapes, and then to pale green lakes spaced out by mountains of amber snow. The flight to the White Womb was scheduled to take only three hours, but his thoughts were racing faster still. Pressed against his pounding chest, his Feeding Day ticket felt like a gold bar.

Sean's taunts still rattled in Isaac's head like the tics of a settling house—steady, implacable, and infuriating. The man had wasted countless people's time making no sense, raising no point, and all while claiming Isaac and everything he stood for did the same. How could someone essentially doing *nothing* be so tiresome?

Still... maybe it was the pristine view, or the cheap in-flight Chardonnay, but in the gentle light of hindsight, he had to admit Sean was *useful*. He reminded Isaac of the follies of an uneducated mind. Not stupid, per se—they'd been admitted to the same university, after all—but willfully ignorant. Certainly, it would take time for anybody to learn the full legacy of Ræek, but if he couldn't be bothered to even try, that wasn't a mark against Isaac for pointing it out.

Whether the clouds rained sugar or sand come Wednesday (opposing visions had promised both), Sean would know he had nothing to do with it. He was a societal ghost, with no impact on anything. He was worth only four words.

I'm better than him.

And Isaac thought those four words for the rest of the flight, in the terminal, and on the shuttle bus to his hotel.

November 8

"Everybody keep moving, please, one at a time! Proceed to the belt numbered on your ticket, make your offering, and follow the marked lines to the exit." Rising out of the cracked earth like metallic cacti, the loudspeakers droned the familiar instructions along the zig-zagging queues encircling the White Womb.

Any anxiety left in Isaac's body was only positive. It was his birthday and New Year's Day both rolled into one. Here he was, with thousands of other citizens—young and old, of every race and gender and creed—ready to feed firsthand. If there was a greater national honor, he never knew it. It was a shame that the less wealthy among them could not attend, but he was too thrilled to be concerned with finances. His mother had bought everybody's tickets, and for that he was grateful.

A hundred feet away, the line curved into a broad semicircle, bordered by hazard-striped sawhorses and MPs in gray helmets hugging machine guns. Sixteen rows of turnstiles and metal detectors guarded the nested lanes which led to the conveyor belts curling into the Womb.

Isaac turned his head up ever so slightly, feeling the morning warmth caress his face through a fire-red sky. Then he turned it up as far as he could, and there beheld Ræek.

The most recent remote measurements estimated it was forty-five stories tall. A great mound of moist sinew, pale and semi-translucent, it pulsed harmoniously against the

graying mountains on the desert horizon. Chunks of mossy earth and rusted metal jutted from its sludgy sides like regalia passed down from on high. Of its fifty tentacles, six or seven curled lazily in the air, revealing the innumerable bristly hairs rustling across its underside which could smother a school bus (were it so inclined, with a good reason). Above, circling gulls cawed and roosted on the pallid growths jutting from its topmost curves like a bony crown. Around its perimeter, the wide black conveyer belts slowly churned to the brink of the Womb, that pristine cavity seeming to stretch into infinity like an inverted nuclear reactor.

Imposing? Intimidating? Perhaps. Isaac could see both sides of the debate. But now, he just saw freedom. It was not the first time he'd witnessed Ræek in person—"field trips" to the White Womb were frequent for Committee staff. But it was never this close, and never ready to be fed.

Twenty minutes later, Isaac reached the first border. The guards checked his jacket, and he laid his belt, phone, and wallet upon the x-ray machine before passing through. There, he collected his implements and approached the back of the small crowd finishing up at Belt 13.

As he waited, he observed others' offerings slowly make their way into the Womb, like petals curling inward to an almighty flower. A few meters away, a body, pale and suit-clad, moved in a slow procession alongside a rainbow of flowers. Some people had the most inspiring funeral requests.

Then, as if he hadn't waited at all, it was his turn. Delicately, he withdrew the petri dish from his breast pocket and admired the quarter-sized gray chunk one last time. He considered making a declaration of purpose (he'd had plenty of time to draft one on the flight over), but decided it spoke for itself.

"Negligible matter," the neurologist had called it. Not an uncommon procedure these days, and only a welt on the side of your head to show for it. A little critical thinking here, some long-term memory there, but we only use ten percent of it at a time anyway, right? Ræek could be trusted with what mattered most, Isaac knew that. It had gotten them this far.

For the West. He tipped his hands forth, and the dish clattered onto the bloodstained conveyer belt. He watched as it slowly merged with the other feed.

Within a week, Ræek would begin its crawl across the Trail, carving a supple seam through the nation. With it, hopes and dreams would follow. Setbacks and scandals would arise, Isaac could concede. Lawmakers would bicker; the economy would fluctuate; trees may turn to raw meat and paintings peel away to reveal their subjects' skeletons. But what cycle never hit setbacks? It wasn't perfect, but it was what they had, and he could be grateful for that.

Isaac raised his camera and centered a photo. The air was alive with the chittering of shutters on all sides. Already, the climate had begun to recover: the sky's red tint dimmed, the mountains relaxed to a gentle blue, and pinpricks of green burst from the chapped earth. The buzz had downshifted to a dull hum. It'd be gradual, but nothing worthwhile ever came quickly.

Zooming in, he noticed his father, across the expanse. They made eye contact. A faint rise of the brows. Then back. He would go over and see them, in a moment. Mom, at least.

...

So Isaac had made it. Well, that was good. A shame Amy couldn't reserve the same belt for everyone.

As he rested a hand on his wife's shoulder, James clenched his teeth, tightened his jaw. He *was* proud, dammit—just to be *here*. For his country, for himself. He watched as the dump trucks thrummed past the armed checkpoint and up to the Womb, ferrying the first batch of external offerings.

He wished Kimberly could be here to see this, but Amy insisted on a babysitter. She was a fine mother, but there were things about fatherhood she couldn't understand.

In her delicate yet sharp hands, Amy held an old kettle. "So that we'll get a heads-up if things start to boil over," she'd declared.

James remembered growing up in the far East. His father told him about the time he saw Ræek pass through town near the end of the Trail. It was shorter, then—not much taller than the corner drugstore, Pa would say with a sparkle in his lazy eye—but it was no less inspiring. Since then, Feeding Day's eve had become something of a family holiday, always to be punctuated with a hearty meal and a rowdy jig to that old song, "Our Feedin' Days Are Here." Even after all these years, he could still tap out the beat:

*Our feedin' days are here
Our feedin' days are here
The Trail is set, now place your bets
Our feedin' days are here*

James smiled.

...

Laurie woke up.

She craned her neck. The first thing she saw was her fiancé, head slumped to his chest and a copy of a fitness magazine in his lap, in the chair adjacent to her bed. She smirked, but not much; her bandaged cheek made her pillow feel like a pile of nails. An IV drip ran from her arm, past her heavy head, and out of sight.

A small, boxy TV hung from the wall at the other side of the room. The White Womb was on—Feeding Day in full swing, ant-like crowds shuffling up to the belts and depositing their offerings. Progress in, well, progress... or so Laurie hoped. According to the graphs scrolling beneath the chyron, an East move was 70% certain, but some critical swing states had yet to feed. Even at this hour, the dump trucks still streamed out of the aerial view's sight.

A little white remote control was taped to her bed's railing. With an achy arm, she reached over and flipped to the East Network.

"ASSAULT SUSPECT CHARGED." Reporters crowded around a heavysset young woman in a ragged beanie, a sweater with a cartoon bear on it, and handcuffs, as police led her from a squad car to the precinct station.

For a moment, the pain was almost pleasurable. Laurie knew she could count on EN to come through with the fair and balanced truth: the West was weak.

“—who threw a brick at Mann after her departure from AfterNews studios last Saturday, has been formally charged with criminal assault. Her lawyer could not be reached for comment.”

The footage switched to a rapid POV shot, headed down a hospital hallway. *“We now go live to where Ms. Mann is recuperating from her injuries.”*

Laurie changed the channel back and patted down her hair. She hadn’t done her nails in a while, but that was alright—it’d help sell her story.

...

Sean glowered at his laptop in the darkness. The image turned his stomach. It was just as well he wasn’t there, he told himself. He’d heard the thing smelled like piss and raw fish.

A slap on the wrist. This wasn’t a tyranny, they told him. He’d be banned from all university activities for the rest of the semester, and the outburst would be reflected in some capacity on his academic record. He could live with that—they were the ones buying into a bullshit illusion, so what was one more asterisk?

But the heat was on; if someone wasn’t already tapping his phone, they definitely had his webcam. The bomb was a no-go now. It was stuffed under his bed, behind a wall of shoeboxes and magazines, along with the unwrapped fuses.

Isaac Kostalecki’s smug face jabbed at his head like a migraine. What was *wrong* with that audience? He had the whole performance planned out. Nobody suspects a debater to not take a side; they were supposed to rise up, to recognize the insanity of this whole system. To march up and out into the hemorrhagic twilight and question everything from the dirt below to the dying stars above. Instead, they gawked like dimwitted toddlers as a couple of thugs dragged him from the platform he had every right to occupy.

So he employed sarcasm, some irony. So he used “strong language.” Were those not valid arguing tactics as well?

As Cale and Dusty guffawed over a bag of chips in the kitchen, Sean slid back even further. Where did respect come from, history or the heart? He wondered who in that sea of faces really comprehended why they were there. What the offerings they’d drop off to be absorbed by that thing’s pores could ever amount to.

He considered it all. Joining the inevitable riot in a few weeks; it had been a month since he’d taken part in a good one, and the baton bruises had almost faded away. Starting a vlog, broadcasting his rebellion to the masses until popular demand begged he be given a national platform—one that’d *really* open some eyes. Or just waiting four more years for his profile to lower, storming down to the White Womb with a better bomb and some buckshot, and blowing that fucking mess up. Starting over anew. Going *all* the way back.

It couldn’t have been there forever.

“Disgusting,” Sean muttered. He closed his laptop.